

## **THE PROFILE OF A MULTILINGUAL**

### **1. Introduction**

Studying multilinguality is a fairly new research area but very impressively growing into a significant body of data on how multilingual learners develop their multicompetence. As it was in the case of bilinguals but multiplied by a number of additional languages learnt, multilinguality research struggles with terminological inconsistencies and complexities the phenomenon presents. On the level of cognitive and psycholinguistic processes these complexities derive from a variety of parameters involved in each individual learning context.

De Angelis (2007: 12) points out the following factors: the age of acquisition of each subsequent foreign language and the sequence in which they were acquired/learnt, the proficiency level of each, the learning history expressed by the type of instruction (natural versus formal in the classroom) and its length and intensity, actual exposure and use of languages and skills distribution for each. The combination, interaction and non-linear character of multilingual development make it almost impossible to establish patterns and models.

Additionally, it needs to be emphasized that the cognitive complexity has to be viewed as only part of the process in which affectivity has to be seen as the major player. However, affectivity is difficult to measure and tools of its measurement such as questionnaires or diary studies are usually criticized for their subjectivity and superficiality as they are grounded in the subjects' selective information and responses that are meant to create a preferred image of a given individual. It seems that more popular among researchers is the focus on cognitive aspects, such as cross-linguistic influences (CLI) between languages of a multilingual, language transfer at different levels and between different languages either typologically close or distant, metalinguistic awareness and transfer of learning (strategies) (Safont-Jordá 2005). Thus there are

very few studies which focus on multilingual affectivity. Among them are those of Aneta Pavlenko, Jean Marc Dewaele and Larissa Aronin. This article looks at a selection of studies conducted by me in the period 2010-11, which describe multilingual learning experiences and their affective dimensions. They all demonstrate that affective dimension in multilingual development is of primary importance over the cognitive one. These studies employed association tasks and autobiographical narratives.

## 2. Narrative texts in language acquisition

### 2.1. Autobiographical studies

Brodkey (1987: 47) assumes the importance of studying personal narratives by saying:

One studies stories nor because they are true ... but for the same reason that people tell them, in order to learn about the terms on which others make sense of their lives: what they take into account and what they do not; what they consider worth contemplating and what they do not; what they are and are not willing to raise and discuss as problematic and unresolved in life.

Belcher and Connor (2001) edited an extremely interesting collection of interview-based narratives which are “personal accounts of the formative literacy experiences of highly successful – both linguistically and professionally – L2 users” (p. 3). As the authors state in the introduction, this kind of research instrument becomes a significant tool used in numerous studies on language achievement in different contexts as they are believed to be informative in terms of learners’ metalinguistic awareness and learning strategy use as well as being “a powerful teaching tool, in that they are highly accessible, easy to relate to and, when either read or written, can increase learners’ awareness of their own learning processes” (*ibid.*: 4, after Bailey and Ochsner 1983; Bell 1997). Belcher and Connor relate to examples of narratives used as research tools (Table 1).

In their own study of multilinguals and their profiles Belcher and Connor (2001) describe multilinguals by referring to them as *the fortunate traveller, the frustrated multiliterate and a citizen of the world*, and seeing their multiliterate lives as *cultural transformation (writing), lifelong process, taking the best from a number of worlds, to make a difference and fun of developing literacy*.

**Table 1.** Narratives as research tools (sample studies)

Focus	Titles	Author(s)
Teacher and educator recollection of their experiences	1. On becoming a Language Educator 2. Stories from the Heart 3. Living Rhetoric and Composition 4. Narration as Knowledge	Casanave & Schecter (1997) Meyer (1996) Roen, Brown and Enos (1999) Trimmer (1997)
Language specialists and non-language professionals as L2 learners (first-person-reflections)	1. Onna Rashiku (Like a Woman) 2. The Multilingual Self 3. Lost in Translation 4. Two Years in the Melting Pot	Ogulnick (1998) Lvovich (1997) Hoffman (1989) Liu (1984)

## 2.2. Autobiographical studies on multilinguality

### 2.2.1. Appraisals in multilingual development

My first study of a profile of a multilingual language learner/user whose overview is presented here looked closer at individual appraisals made by the subjects in their assessment of learning multiple languages by means of formal instruction (Gabryś-Barker 2011). The study implemented Scherer's stimulus evaluation checks (SECs) (2001) consisting of the appraisal values presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Appraisals according to Scherer (2001)

Appraisal value	Focus
Novelty	a degree of familiarity of the stimulus (task/data/action to be undertaken)
Intrinsic pleasantness	how pleasant is the stimulus which will determine the approach to it (indulgence versus avoidance)
Goal/need significance	evaluation of how relevant, significant and immediate the stimulus (task/action) is for an individual
Coping potential	the check of one's ability of coping or changing the stimulus to adjust to one's potential
Norm/self compatibility	evaluation of the social/cultural appropriacy of the stimulus

The main findings and implications of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. The study data demonstrated the role of the *affective domain* in language learning situations in the descriptions of different reactions of individuals in similar learning contexts and in expressing different intensity of experience resulting from one's individual appraisals.
2. The development of *coping potential* and one's positive perception of it leads to active involvement in a learning activity, whereas, a negative perception of one's coping potential results in disengagement from a learning task and dependency on the teacher.
3. An *explicit learner training in learning* should be based both on the learners' former L2 experiences (cognitive and affective) and on explicit focus on a range of strategies formerly unknown, it should constitute an essential part of L3 instruction.

### 2.2.2. Stability *versus* change in multilingual development

The second study which intended to create a picture of a multilingual learner aimed to compare their perceptions of the prior L2 and L3 learning experiences with a view to establishing areas of stable characteristics and those which were evolving (Gabryś-Barker 2011a).

**Table 3.** Permanency *versus* change (Gabryś-Barker 2011a)

Feature of	Aspects of learning processes
Permanency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the role of motivation and affectivity in both learning contexts</li> <li>• the same appraisal values contributing to growing/diminishing motivation (such as a coping potential)</li> <li>• visible fear of lack of progress and inability to become native-like in speech and communication situations</li> </ul>
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more negative attitude to one's language abilities and potential, but also performance in L3</li> <li>• less autonomy, resulting in teacher dependence</li> <li>• inability to transfer learning strategies (mostly because of perceived linguistic differences between L2 and L3)</li> <li>• critical attitude to teaching methods as incompatible with one's learning profile and learning history (novelty of a learning situation perceived as a threat)</li> </ul>

The study demonstrated a generally positive approach to L2 learning which was expressed by:

1. Motivation of intrinsic nature and pride in accomplishing high language competence.

2. Satisfaction with the methods of instruction and competence and enthusiasm of teachers themselves.
3. Fear of fossilization but autonomy in language development that eliminates this threat.

Unfortunately, L3 learning context was viewed quite differently and expressed by negative evaluative comments in relation to:

1. Language choice: L3 was usually imposed as an obligatory part of programme of studies.
2. Inability to overcome one's low self-esteem and perception of lacking coping potential; generally negative affectivity.
3. More dependence on the teacher and at the same time, critical assessment of the L3 teachers.
4. Inability to relate to a different, perhaps unfamiliar or too traditional formal instruction in the classroom.

So in general it seems that the same features of learning processes and their affective dimensions are evaluated as significant for L2 and L3 learning, however, their different perceptions result in a shift from positive to negative attitudes and evaluations in an L3 context of learning (Gabryś-Barker 2011a). In the context of L3 learning, negativity results from

*perceived language complexity* on the one hand, and the *incompatibility of the method of instruction* with learners' profiles and their learning histories on the other; bigger difficulties encountered in the L3 context may be due to the *age of subjects*, whose first FL learning experiences occurred in their childhood (L2 private instruction in the majority of cases or instruction at primary school); affective factors play a more significant role in language achievement in adulthood, thus L3 learning experience can be seen as more traumatic and more negative; adults appear to exhibit more *teacher dependency* and thus a teacher appears to be "the significant other" in L3 learning, much more than in L2 instruction; the novelty of a situation for an adult learner is not appreciated (contrary to L2 context) since it brings insecurity, *anxiety* and *fear of the unfamiliar*. (Gabryś-Barker 2011a)

What follows from the above is that in introducing L3 instruction in the adult learning context, it is necessary to emphasize that one of the major issues is the teacher dependency of adult learners on one hand, and teachers' unawareness of their learning histories (e.g. methods of instruction previously known), on the other. Also adult learners' awareness of their own appraisals and openness to one's own abilities (coping potential) should constitute part of learners' repertoires of self-knowledge (Gabryś-Barker 2011a).

### 2.2.3. Affectivity in multilingual learning contexts

The third study on the profile of a multilingual language learner and user meant to establish how significant the cognitive and affective dimensions of L2 and L3 learning are (Gabryś-Barker 2011b). The associations based on autobiographical memory produced by the subjects showed that

Affective factors play a more significant role in language achievement as adults demonstrate more vulnerability in terms of their self-confidence, self-esteem, sensitivity to how others see them, and how they see themselves (Gabryś-Barker 2011b).

On the basis of the data collected (Gabryś-Barker 2011b) it can be observed that the tendency of affectivity to dominate over the cognitive dimension of the subjects' recollection of their learning experiences is observed almost on the same levels in each of the two contexts: 63% for L2 and 61% for L3 learning contexts. Despite this, however, positive emotions constitute 80% of all affective comments in L2 experiences singled out as significant by the subjects. In the L3 retrospections, affectivity is marked negatively in a dominant 62% of the subjects' responses.

So clearly, affectivity expressed by the subjects in their memory-comments is very different for each of the contexts recalled. The cognitive dimension of data presents a much more homogenous picture for both learning contexts. Negative cognitive comments dominate both in the case of L2 and L3 (60% and 72% respectively), however, as mentioned earlier, they are much less numerous in the subjects' comments on their learning than affective ones (Gabryś-Barker 2011b).

The qualitative content of the comments made by the subjects in the retrospective task of reflecting on their learning experiences shows that in L2 learning at the cognitive level the subjects expressed concern about different areas of language as being either difficult or easy. The emphasis was put on effective teaching, good teachers and interesting materials. At the same time negativity was expressed in relation to insufficient speaking and listening practice in class and badly taught grammar. At the affective level, the comments report on the ease of learning, positive attitudes and motivation to learn to be able to communicate with native speakers in authentic target language contexts and with peers in classroom interaction. The ability to participate in the TL culture was seen as evidence of language achievement. The frustrations expressed resulted mostly from speaking apprehension, anxiety and occasionally, dissatisfaction with one's results and communication breakdowns, which had a damaging effect on self-esteem (Gabryś-Barker 2011b).

The negative affectivity observed in the subjects' comments results in insecurity and anxiety, which are also due to the influence of transfer of training

expressed by the incompatibility of the method used in L3 learning with the adult learners' previous learning experience. Thus, models of adult teaching should take into account the importance of the affective dimension. A good start would be to make the adults aware of, and thus better able to modify, their affectivity, which is expressed in their appraisals of past *versus* present learning. This awareness-raising would have to focus on the role of previous experiences (their novelty and familiarity), defining one's goals explicitly and most of all a sensible and open-minded approach to one's coping potential.

#### 2.2.4. Age and proficiency levels as factors in a multilingual profile

The fourth study was an extension of Study 2 (Gabryś-Barker 2011a) and was carried out as a joint project (Gabryś-Barker and Otwinowska-Kasztelanica 2011). It also meant to look at L2 versus L3 learning experiences. However, this time two groups were compared. The two variables which were initially assumed to be significant were the starting age of learning L3 and the level of advancement in L3. Group 1 represented later L3 starters (university level) whereas Group 2 started their L3 learning instruction at the school level. Also Group 1 was at elementary level of L3, whereas Group 2 consisted of students whose L3 was upper intermediate/advanced.

The study demonstrated visible differences between the two groups of multilingual language users/learners, which can be summarised in the following points (Gabryś-Barker and Otwinowska-Kasztelanica 2011):

- Attitude to the language learnt is influenced by achievement, success and progress in language. It is most visible in L2 contexts (both in Group 1 and Group 2 advanced English) and only in L3 for the advanced group (Group 2). What is more the late starters do not seem capable to overcome their anxieties and low perception of their coping potential. This is due to their visible lack of autonomy in learning.
- Motivations of L3 early starters (Group 2) are more integrative and intrinsic, which is perhaps also due to a fairly advanced language competence resulting in ability to participate in L3 culture (e.g. reading literary texts in their original versions). Motivation in Group 2 fluctuates with age and it becomes more instrumental, e.g. learning a FL is important in terms of professional career in adulthood (in the context of L2 – English perceived as the major FL language).
- Noticing cross-linguistic similarities and consciously applying them to language learning depends on the level of advancement in L2 and L3. Only the advanced group display metalinguistic awareness. They emphasise the role of cross-linguistic comparison in the form of conscious analysis of both languages. They also emphasise the role of similarity in learning other lan-

guages. The elementary group do not comment on the metalinguistic aspect of their L3 learning at all.

- The learning strategies employed by the groups differ considerably. The advanced learners employ a wider range and different types of learning strategies, often involving cross-linguistic comparison. They understand the role of L2 in learning L3 and L3 in learning L2 and other languages.

An important implication for multilingual language instruction is that “an early start in L3 learning (Group 2) contributes to an autonomous approach to language learning, whereas in the case of late starters (Group 1) an almost total dependence on a teacher and classroom instruction are observed. This can be explained by the adults’ insecurity and fear of negative evaluation and a lack of visible progress” (Gabryś-Barker and Otwinowska-Kasztelanic 2011).

### 3. Study description

The present study aims to expand on the findings of the previous projects focusing on the multilinguals’ learning experiences but it also intends to investigate the ways in which the subjects describe themselves as multilinguals. In other words, what aspects of their profiles they consider significant enough to be commented upon in their personal narratives.

As mentioned earlier a profile of a multilingual means information concerning the age of acquisition and sequence of learning each subsequent foreign language, competence level in each of the languages, also the type of instruction received and its length and intensity (De Angelis 2007). This however constitutes only background information. Profile in my understanding also describes learning motivations and attitudes, learning strategies, degree of cross-linguistic transfer and transfer of learning. The learner profile should also embrace such aspects as strong and weak points, difficulties in language learning/use and ways of coping with them.

The subjects are the same as those involved in Study 3 reported earlier (Gabryś-Barker 2011b). They are all university students with advanced L2 (English) and elementary/pre-intermediate L3 (mostly German and French). Their study profiles differ as some of them are about to complete their qualifications as EFL teachers, some are future translators and still the others study English and American literature and culture. The total number of informants in this study was twenty four. The data collection tool used was an autobiographical narrative of 400 words written by the subjects. It was not restricted in focus, the subjects were just given a title *My profile as a multilingual language learner and user*. In the data presentation and analysis representative citations from the narratives were chosen for the interpretation purposes.



## 4. Data presentation and discussion

### 4.1. Data

The general comment that can be made with reference to the narrative texts of multilingual informants in this study testify to the previous findings reporting on the supremacy of affective dimension of learning over a cognitive one in the case of adult multilingual learners. The subjects themselves openly express the view that affectivity plays a major role in their language achievement and results from the learning context itself. It is the language learnt on one hand and the agents involved in the learning process: the learner and the teacher, on the other. However, as it was observed in the earlier studies, L2 affectivity is positive, whereas L3 learning is often reported as traumatic or to say the least, stressful. The frequently referred to critical incidents exemplify the above.

### Sample narratives

#### Motivation to learn

I can describe myself as a multilingual person. However, my proficiency and autonomy in all the languages I know differ depending on my motivation and the circumstances in which I learn a given language. I am fascinated by the idea of multilinguality and I enjoy learning new languages, therefore it is very probable that in a few years' time the list of my languages will be longer. Living in a global village, we meet more and more people from different countries and cultures. Being able to understand them is of high priority to me (Sabina).

Learning several languages causes an enormous amount of difficulties in my process of language education, but despite the hard times I had to face during studying them, I can observe that my chances in gaining a better education and a job have increased. That encourages me to broaden my horizons and to develop my knowledge (Zuzanna).

I am aware that my profile as a multilingual learner and user has been developed by hard work and effort. I had an opportunity to meet a teacher who was very enthusiastic about her job. Moreover, a month spent in England was such a significant event and experience that enabled me to feel as a real English speaker. It helped me also to make a decision of learning German and developing my language interest. Now I am a novice teacher who tries to be very enthusiastic about my job. I teach both English and German. I try to develop students' cultural awareness and I try to show them the beauty and significance of learning languages and being a multilingual learner and user (Monika).

I use my languages in order to communicate which is my priority. For me, more important is fluency than accuracy and every strategy in communication is good if it works. My learning strategies are interchangeable every time I learn a new lan-

guage. I seek positive aspects in every failure and put a lot of effort in order not to discourage myself (Daria).

My profile as a multilingual user is strongly connected with the profile of mine as a multilingual learner. I communicate in English willingly, often participate in class discussions and simply like to use this language. In the case of German, especially because my vocabulary is limited and problems with pronunciation, I tend to avoid communicating and speaking in this language (Sabina).

## **Attitude to learning**

I like learning foreign languages. I gain experience and I am able to compare languages and the ease of teaching them. In addition to this, I am also more responsible for my own learning and using them (Dorota).

In the group of language learners one can encounter those who are true enthusiasts as well as those who treat it as a torture. I have been a language learner since the age of five and during this period of time I experienced all kinds of attitudes from the lover-hater spectrum (Alicja).

English has influenced my other languages. I believe that I somehow neglected learning them, because I felt that my proficient use of English would help me to communicate everywhere. As I am older, I realise that English is no longer an asset, it is a must. That is why I want to continue learning German. I also noticed that learning languages comes easier to me when it is not obligatory. I find it troublesome when I am forced to do it, but when I do it of my own will, it is much easier (Magda).

## **Affectivity**

The affective domain of FL learning and use seem to have exerted the strongest influence on the development of my language skills. This influence has been mostly positive in the case of L2 English (positive attitude to the language, intrinsic motivation, usefulness for real-life communication, and confidence and satisfaction coming from its use), whereas mostly negative in the case of L3 German (compulsiveness to learn it as the only motivating factor, negative attitudes, lack of real-life usefulness). Therefore, although there may have been certain factors facilitating my learning of L3 (transfer of learning, familiarity with difficulties, experience in coping with novelty), even though I am very enthusiastic in my learning and use of L2, I have got fossilized in my use of L3. Hopefully, I will encounter a critical incident in my learning or use of German which would change my attitudes and motivation to further develop my skills (Basia, a pre-service teacher).

Most of my connection with this language (L3 German) has rather an affective character. It is related to the emotional sphere of a “self” and is connected with positive and negative associations. A huge role is played by my self-esteem, which in many cases can be seen as really high, but then lower as an effect of some factors. Nevertheless, after having been supported by the classroom authority my approach

and attitude towards both of the languages changed. It is confidence that provides me with the motivation to proceed and as a future teacher I will also try to pay attention to the affective factors in language learning, because features such as self-esteem or ambition are of a great importance not only as applied to FLL but also in any other sphere of life (Kamila, a pre-service teacher).

### **Openness and willingness *versus* inhibition and stress**

My profile as a multilingual person is quite vivid. As a learner of English, I am willing to try out new strategies and techniques that can facilitate my learning. As a learner of German, I am overwhelmed by stress which I tried to overcome thanks to the transfer of learning from my L2. Consequently, learning German was connected with numerous negative critical incidents that exerted a considerable influence on my perception of this language. However, learning of English was mainly connected with positive critical incidents. Therefore, I would like to emphasize that I am a more confident learner of English, and I would like to connect my future with this language (Kasia, a pre-service teacher).

### **Language factor *versus* human factor (teachers as agents of change)**

There are some differences and similarities between the processes of learning two FLs which depend on our teachers, our aim of learning and the life-situations in which we are forced to use the language (Adrianna).

I must confess that I wonder how my life would look if I had had a different German teacher. If I would be studying German at the university or would I be doing something absolutely different. Although I have been to Germany many times and only two times in England, I love the country so much that I want to live there. I still use German at a very high level of proficiency because at some age I could be called a bilingual child and I will never forget this language, but although I realise that I will never use English as well as I was using German, I can't imagine my life without it. English is the language I can use for living (Beata).

### **Cross-linguistic influences**

Learning a number of languages is a helpful tool in developing one's personality and improving various language skills. It is good to learn and use languages that share similar roots, as their influence on each other is very strong and, in most cases, appears to be useful. [...]

[...] I am able to think not only in English, which I am a fluent user of, but also in German or Latin (Daria, a pre-service teacher).

[...] during my life I have dealt with a few foreign language. Despite that it is English which is my L2 and sometimes I have an impression that I am able to think in English. I suppose I will not have more difficulty in learning another one. The multilingual language learner and user thanks to his own experience has language intuition developed (Magda).

## 4.2. Discussion

The preliminary observation that needs to be made is that autobiographical narratives produced by the multilingual subjects almost entirely focus on description of their learning histories more than the profiles of themselves. This is not to say of course that a learning history has no bearing on the profile, however it only constitutes background information and reflective comments based on learning experiences are scarce.

What is more, when describing their L2 and L3 learning experiences no references are made to L1 thus it may be assumed that it does not figure as a reference system for multilingual learners. As is well-known, L1 plays a significant role in L2 acquisition, however it seems that in the context where L3 becomes the focus of learning, it is L2 that takes over the role of L1. Perhaps even more, L3 becomes a similar experience as it is learnt and not acquired so motivations and cognitive and affective processes are similar.

In describing their learning histories and profiles multilinguals stress the importance of the acquisition order of L2 and L3, emphasizing specificity of learning at different stages of cognitive and personality development as well as motivations and attitudes. Early learning of English as L2 and the level of competence reached at the moment when one starts learning L3 may have varied effects on L3 success. This is however very individual and can be either positive or negative.

Multilinguals' perceptions of language distance contribute to the level of learning transfer but mostly language transfer, allowing to make comparisons and draw upon them in L3 learning and production. What comes as surprising is the fact that those multilinguals who learn French seem to be discouraged by the complexity of the language as compared with their L2 perceptions of English. It may be assumed that previous learning experience does not exert such an influence on L3 learning and does not facilitate the challenge of learning a language which is very different and seen as much more complex. So the prior learning experiences do not always have a positive effect on the later learning.

Most of the subjects participating in the study were pre-service EFL teachers which is clearly reflected in the way they report on their multilingual learning experiences. They emphasize factors significant in their own learning such as motivations, attitudes, classroom climate and most of all teachers' contribution to those, thus expressing their expectations of themselves as EFL teachers that would strive at reaching those targets. Also by reflecting upon their difficulties in language learning – be it L2 or L3, they show their awareness of the need to focus on those in their teaching, too.

Some of the trainees demonstrate a strong instrumental orientation in their language learning in relation to L3, stating that the present job market is more

friendly towards those who know at least three foreign languages, but not all of these languages are rightly perceived as being of equal status. English and German are seen as the best choices. However, it is important to mention that also some of the students see language learning as a tool for personality development and becoming more cross-culturally aware. Thus these students expand their learning experience by learning additional languages, L4 and L5.

## 5. The profile of a multilingual

So what is the profile of a multilingual that emerges from the above reviewed and reported studies? It has to be assumed that they will not be very homogenous as people learning languages learn them for different purposes and have different motivations and ambitions in developing their language competences, they have different personalities, predispositions and learning styles. What is important in these studies is however that the subjects were all pre-service EFL teachers, some of them also teachers of German and a didactic approach is clearly expressed in their narratives, for example by the comment of one of them: “My profile as a multilingual user is strongly connected with the profile of mine as a multilingual learner.”

To sum up, the most important factors and dimensions of a multilingual profile as they were singled out in their autobiographical narratives were:

- the role of learning history (the major focus of narratives),
- importance of affectivity *versus* cognition, especially in the context of L3 learning at the later stages of life,
- order of acquisition determining attitudes and motivations (age factor),
- transfer of learning and development of language awareness,
- disregard for L1,
- teachers as agents of change,
- professional future as factor in attitude to learning a language,
- multilinguality as personal development and life prospect,
- communicating cross-culturally.

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